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Higher Education: Hitting the Books, not the Bank

As the school bell rings signaling the start of another academic year, parents and children have been vigorously preparing for the “back to school” season. The courses have been chosen and the school supplies purchased, but for many recent high school graduates, their education has abruptly come to a halt due to a nationwide economic slump and rising tuition costs of Florida’s community colleges and universities. The U.S. economy increasingly demands a college degree to achieve financial success, yet many low-income and minority families and an increasing amount of middle-income households are unable to afford the rising costs of getting that education.

At a time when a college education is so important, why is it so financially out-of-reach for so many?

As the Representative for Florida’s 2nd Congressional District, my classroom has been in the homes and businesses of my constituents who look to me for help, assistance and guidance. Traveling across North Florida and talking with my constituents, I have learned that many parents’ concerns regarding their children’s education do not end once they turn 18. With approximately 80 percent of new jobs requiring education beyond high school, it is imperative that our children have the opportunity to receive the training they need for the careers they wish to pursue. As a member of Congress, I play a crucial role in ensuring that higher education is affordable for everyone, and as a father of a college student myself, my desire to make higher education more affordable hits even closer to home.

Numerous federal and state programs are in place to assist families with higher education costs. The Higher Education Act (HEA), enacted by Congress in 1965, is one example of the way the federal government is sustaining the concept of the American Dream and investing in Americans who believe this aspiration must not remain elusive. This legislation was created to guarantee that no academically qualified American was barred from college solely for financial reasons.

One of the most beneficial elements of the HEA is the Pell Grant program, the single largest source of federal grant aid for low-income students seeking higher education. Approximately 4.4 million undergraduates received \$11.2 billion in need-based Pell grants during 2002. However, a closer look reveals that the Pell grant is not as advantageous as it once was. Twenty-five years ago, the average Pell grant covered 84 percent of the cost of a four-year, public college education, but this percentage slipped to 39 percent by 1999, as inflation has outpaced the

typical grant amount.

Currently, the maximum Pell grant is funded at \$4,050, and the Administration wishes to freeze this amount as a part of their education budget proposal. The Administration's plan to cut this and other significant programs by slashing the Department of Education's budget falls very short of its promise to leave no child behind. There is potential for the Pell Grant program to remain beneficial if the maximum amount is raised to coincide with rising tuition costs. In this way, the Pell Grant program will continue to benefit low-income students who rely on this funding, not as a mere supplement, but as the primary source of their college funds. When Congress considers the Pell Grant program during the reauthorization of the HEA, I will work to ensure that the maximum Pell grant is appropriately increased, and higher education programs are adequately funded and proficiently administered.

On a state and local level, I support Florida Prepaid and Florida Bright Futures Scholarship and companies, such as Sallie Mae, that provide valuable seminars, information sessions, and support programs for families who are planning their children's education. Children from low-income families should not be forced to check their "learning hat" at the door once they reach the designated age of 18. Although these young men and women are technically adults, they are America's children and deserve equal educational opportunities. Our country will not revert back to the time when the poor were locked out of higher education and college was hardly a given for middle-class families. As students file back into the classroom, Congress will also reconvene this fall and face many budgetary issues dealing with funding for education. I look forward to working for students seeking a college diploma by ensuring that federal grants and loans are available for all those who need it.

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